

# Socrates and the Delphic Oracle

Jenny Bryan

Plato's *Apology* is the great philosopher's version of the speech Socrates delivered at his trial in 399 B.C. Among the formal charges against Socrates was that he was unjust, both because he corrupted the youth and because he did not believe in the city gods, but in other new divinities. Yet these and other accusations were based on a misunderstanding of his true activity – or so Socrates explains by relating a story about the Delphic Oracle. Here, Jenny Bryan puts this claim under the spotlight.

The story of Socrates and the Delphic Oracle is one of the most memorable sections of Plato's *Apology* (20c–23c). In the course of the speech attributed to him, Socrates suggests that the main cause of his scandalous reputation is the fact that he possesses 'some kind of wisdom'. But, when the jurors begin to shout their objections, Socrates offers an impressive witness in support of his claim: the god Apollo. For, as Socrates goes on to relate, his old friend Chaerephon once went to Delphi and asked the oracle whether anyone was wiser than Socrates. According to Socrates, in Plato's version at least, Pythia – the priestess of Apollo who served as the oracle – replied 'that no one was wiser'.

## The wisest man of all?

This story provokes lots of questions. Naturally, our first reaction is that we want

Croesus – the king of Lydia who reigned from 560 until his defeat by the Persian king Cyrus in 546 B.C. – is best remembered today for being a very rich man; hence the expression 'as rich as Croesus'. But Herodotus tells the story that, when Croesus wanted to launch a war against Persia, he asked the Delphic Oracle for advice. Pythia told him that if he crossed the Halys to take on Cyrus he would destroy a mighty empire, but Croesus famously misinterpreted the oracle. For he had failed to ascertain which empire the oracle meant and ended up being defeated by Cyrus and destroying his own!

to know whether it is true. In this connection, it is interesting that our other main source of information about Socrates tells a similar story. Xenophon, in his own version of Socrates' defence speech (also called the *Apology*), agrees with Plato that Socrates told the story of Chaerephon at Delphi. However, in Xenophon's version, the oracle did not assert Socrates' superior wisdom, but rather 'Apollo answered that no man was more free or more just or more self-controlled than me' (Xenophon *Apology of Socrates* 14).

Both Xenophon and Plato agree that Socrates told a story about Chaerephon and the oracle during his defence speech. This might be evidence that the real Socrates did indeed give an account along these lines. But it tells us nothing about the historical truth of the story itself. The fact that Plato and Xenophon disagree about what the oracle actually said suggests no more than that they were each trying to characterize Socrates in a particular way, in accordance with the overall emphasis of their 'Socratic' writings. Xenophon tends to emphasize Socrates' self-control and freedom from unnecessary or unwanted desires. In contrast, Plato tends to emphasize Socrates' rationality and commitment to a particular philosophical method.

But even if the god's response itself cannot be adequately verified, we can nevertheless probe Plato's account for what *he* thought the story of the Delphic oracle suggested. And what is particularly striking in this version of the story is Socrates' response to the oracle:

*'When I first heard this, I wondered, What on earth does the god mean! What is he getting at with this riddle? I am well aware that I am not wise in any way. So what does*

*the god mean by saying that I am the wisest? Surely he cannot be lying, since it would not be right for him to do so. For a long time, I was at a loss as to what he meant. Then, very reluctantly, I turned to an investigation along these lines.'*

Socrates is presented as dumbfounded by the Pythia's claim. However, he takes it for granted that Apollo is telling the truth. He concludes that an investigation will unlock the oracle's hidden meaning. After all, it is well known that those who misinterpret the oracle can get themselves into trouble.

## Socrates investigates

It makes sense, then, that Socrates would put careful thought into the meaning of the oracle. He explains that he went systematically to all of those in Athens who had a reputation for wisdom. In each case, Socrates claims, that reputation was revealed to be unjustified. Under questioning, those who thought they were wise, and who others thought were wise, showed that they did not possess such wisdom.

It is hardly surprising that this repeated undermining of those with a reputation for wisdom made Socrates unpopular; Socrates even acknowledges that it was this inquiry that generated the hostility against him. However, in the course of describing his disruptive inquiries, he does at least find some sort of satisfactory interpretation of the oracle. Socrates is repeatedly frustrated in his attempts to find someone who either is wise, or is prepared to admit that they are not. Since Socrates alone is prepared to admit his lack of understanding, he alone is in possession of genuine wisdom – the wisdom that comes from admitting one's ignorance. Socrates offers an interpretation of the oracle along these lines: the oracle is praising Socrates as an example of someone who recognizes how little real wisdom they possess.

## Doing the work of Apollo

In pursuing his investigation of the

oracle's meaning and reaching this answer, Socrates subtly alters the way he talks about his relationship to Apollo. We saw that he began with a respectful attempt to try to work out what the god meant, in the belief that he would not lie. In acknowledging that his investigation made him unpopular, Socrates asserts that he felt he must continue nonetheless: 'I thought that I must treat god's oracle as the most important thing', he explains. Indeed, he even begins to characterise his inquiry as the god's will and claims that he is 'assisting god' in showing up the ignorance of others. In the end, Socrates will claim that Apollo ordered him, through the oracle, to philosophize. This is why he is not willing to stop asking people difficult questions, even on pain of death.

During the course of his defence speech, Socrates describes his shifting attitude towards the oracle. He moves from confusion to investigation. This investigation leads to some sort of understanding. This understanding, in turn, becomes the basis for a fervent commitment to philosophy as if it was some sort of divine decree. This all serves to make Socrates sound deeply devout in his attitude towards Apollo. That, of course, is probably not unrelated to the fact that one of the charges on which Socrates has been brought to trial is that of disrespecting the gods. What is particularly interesting, though, is that, in amongst all of this respect and devotion, there is a hint of a rather less straightforwardly respectful attitude toward the god.

### Putting Apollo to the test

We have seen Socrates describe his puzzlement as to the meaning of the oracle. We have also seen that he resolved to investigate its meaning, on the grounds that Apollo must be telling the truth. Note, however, how Socrates describes the explicit purpose of his investigation:

*'I went to one of those with a reputation for wisdom, so that there, if anywhere, I would prove the oracle wrong and show it that 'this man is wiser than I am, but you said that I am the wisest.'*

On the one hand, Socrates is confident that Apollo does not lie. On the other, he throws himself into his investigation with the intention of proving the oracle to be false. These two ideas do not seem to be compatible. It looks as though Socrates is either confused and inconsistent in his attitude towards god's truthfulness, or he himself is being less than honest.

### Defending Socrates

One way to defend Socrates' apparently

inconsistent position might be to insist on a particular interpretation of the language he uses. Socrates says that he thought that questioning those with a reputation for wisdom would allow him to 'prove the oracle wrong', as most translations have it. But closer inspection of the Greek text reveals that the word Socrates uses here is '*elenchō*'. This is the verb form of the noun *elenchus*, which is often used as a technical term to describe Socrates' philosophical method of testing people's beliefs by asking them questions. The term has the general meaning of 'test' or 'cross-examination' as well as the more particular and negative 'disproof' or 'refutation' (hence 'proving wrong').

There is a lot of debate about Socrates' purpose in asking people questions in the way that he does. Is he aiming simply to reveal their ignorance? Or does he believe that someone one day might actually prove to have the knowledge they claim? This is a question about whether so-called 'Socratic *elenchus*' has the negative aim of proving people wrong or the positive intention of discovering knowledge. His account of his activity in the *Apology* gives hints of both sides, since he originally sets out to find someone who does have wisdom. It is only when he is repeatedly disappointed that he seems to decide that his god-given duty is precisely to expose the ignorance of those people who falsely claim to be wise.

### Tests of truth

In the case of the oracle, we might think that Socrates can be saved from inconsistency if we understand him to be saying that he wanted to 'test the oracle'. This would also, of course, save Socrates from making the potentially controversial suggestion that Apollo does not always tell the truth. This notion of 'testing' would also fit with Socrates' general account in which he sets out to interpret the meaning of the oracle. The problem with understanding Socrates in this way is that he clarifies what he means by '*elenchō*' in what follows. He says that he intended to show the oracle that he had found a man wiser than Socrates, even though the oracle claimed that such a man did not exist. So Socrates makes it pretty clear that he does set out on his investigation with the intention not only of understanding the oracle, but also of actually proving it wrong.

In fact, the apparent conflict in Socrates' beliefs about the oracle represents a common tension in ancient philosophy. On the one hand, figures like Socrates are anti-authoritarian, in the sense that they believe that we should each only accept beliefs that we have tested and scrutinized for ourselves. We should not believe anything simply because someone

tells us it is true. For Socrates, this is the case even if it is the word of god. On the other hand, philosophers in antiquity generally tend to believe in some sort of god and to believe that god knows and speaks the truth. So, if god says something, it carries the weight of divine authority. Socrates' attitude towards the oracle encapsulates both these views. He believes it to be authoritative and true, since it is the word of god. But he also thinks he should only accept it as true once it has been subjected to rigorous testing. The most rigorous testing, in Socrates' mind, results from treating a position critically and trying to disprove it. If a statement can withstand such a test, then we have all the more reason to believe it. Through testing other people and finding them wanting, Socrates serves the god by demonstrating the truth of the oracle.

*Jenny Bryan teaches Classical Philosophy at the University of Manchester. She is the author of Likeness and Likelihood in the Presocratics and Plato.*